

How PR and the fog of corporate disinformation has governments paying to burn the planet

By Grant Ennis

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Public relations is at the core of coal and gas industry influence which has governments actually incentivising the burning of the planet. **Grant Ennis**, who has just released the book *Dark PR: How Corporate Disinformation Undermines our Health and the Environment*, explores how corporate disinformation campaigns allow this to happen.

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Fossil fuel corporations receive more than \$10 billion in subsidies from Australian taxpayers every year. In contrast, the Government announced \$2 billion in climate finance for 2020-2025 at the COP26 conference in Edinburgh; professing to take action to stop global warming, while incentivising the burning of our planet.

International Monetary Fund figures paint a more dramatic picture. The IMF estimates that Australia will subsidise fossil fuels to the tune of \$62 billion in 2023. The numbers include not just direct subsidies to consumers and producers, but also take into account implicit subsidies which an IMF [paper](#) defines as the persistent under-pricing of fossil fuels, that is, not taking environmental impacts into account.

"Underpricing leads to overconsumption of fossil fuels, which accelerates global warming and exacerbates domestic environmental problems, including losses to human life from local air pollution and excessive and road congestion and accidents."

Fossil fuel and other polluting industries have undertaken a long term and concerted effort to influence political debates, to disguise the fact not only that global warming is happening, but that our governments are actively encouraging it through a multitude of financial incentives.

This disinformation campaign has been successful in placating us, to the point that not only do we not organise and act, but we don't even realise we are subsidising the problem at hand.

At the core of this campaign is a sophisticated PR playbook which is rarely discussed. Here's how it plays out in Australia.

Deny, deny, deny

When it comes to global warming, denialism is the devious frame that gets the most press. But Australian fossil fuel interests deny not only that global warming is happening, but also reject that fossil fuels are subsidised. In doing so, they draw from a range of PR talking points used by industries around the world to deny the obvious. And fossil fuel friendly politicians like [Matt Canavan](#) are more than happy to get in on the act.

The IMF tabulates worldwide fossil fuel subsidies at an astounding \$9 trillion a year. But whether or not you agree with the [IMF's calculations](#) or definition of "subsidy," it's impossible to argue with the fact that governments are incentivising the burning of fossil fuels, and that given the enormity of the challenge of global warming, any amount is too much.

But denialism is just the tip of the iceberg. The rest of the playbook gets much less press, despite its much larger impact.

Post-denialism – global warming is awesome

Fossil fuel advocates also suggest that more greenhouse emissions will make the world like a greenhouse. So it will be better for plants. This is no joke. It's called "[atmospheric CO₂ enrichment](#)." In another example of post denialism, Sky News Australia invited Alex Epstein, author of *The Moral Case for Fossil Fuels*, to [speak on the "Human Flourishing Project"](#) and advocate against Australian climate action.

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Post-denialism confuses the discussion around global warming, as why should we act if not only is there not a problem – but that everything is awesome. It's important not to laugh this off. These talking points get fed to government officials who end up using them in real policy discussions. During Donald Trump's tenure, the head of the United States Environmental Protection Agency claimed that fossil fuels help society "[flourish](#)."

In 2015, the Australian Institute of Public Affairs (IPA), a pro-industry group, issued a report entitled, "The life saving potential of coal: How Australian coal could help 82 million Indians access electricity."

Normalising climate change

In the 90s, corporate focus groups tested several ways of talking about the greenhouse effect. They concluded that the most successful term for diluting political will for action was "climate change." These PR actors, namely Frank Luntz, then went on to advise the Bush administration who ran with the term and largely succeeded in making it the preferred term in use today*.

Yale University followed up two decades later with a behavioural study that confirmed that exposure to "climate change" rather than "global warming" was more likely to make people politically complacent. In other words, less likely to organise and demand political action.

University of Wollongong's Sharon Beder [notes](#) that Australian dark PR has gone a step further to normalise the problem as "climate variability," to which she adds, "this latest iteration into climate variability may indeed bury public concern."

The "silver boomerang" of efficiency

Fossil fuel interests unanimously call for increased investment in efficient technologies. But when technology becomes more efficient, people use more of it. This includes improving the fuel economy of automobiles, or making them electric (rather than allowing for cities to be more walkable and bike friendly), and promoting a range of technologies that do the same job, for a lesser energy cost.

The problem with this is that, as we learned from Stanley Jevons' [observations](#) over a hundred years ago, when it becomes cheaper to drive further, people don't save money. They drive more. Planners end up responding and build homes further away. In another example, when air conditioning efficiency increases, people end up using at least as much energy as with the old technology.

This is not idle speculation. The economy-wide rebound effect of adaptive population behaviour is [documented](#) to nearly, if not completely, cancel out gains from efficiency. When government officials repeat industry talking points, they tend to underscore the importance of incentivising the development of "efficient" innovative technologies – by doing so they sedate public discussion and forestall real action.

The (not so) magical carbon capture & storage

The fossil fuel industry promotes the magical idea that we can somehow pump greenhouse gases back into the ground for less than the energy cost to extract them. It's a fanciful concept called Carbon Capture Storage, or CCS. It's such nonsense that Australian journalist Ketan Joshi [wrote](#) that CCS is

"the preferred vehicle for perpetual climate delay. It is an eternal gravity well for public money with nearly nothing to show for it. To invest heavily in CCS instead of working towards fully decarbonising electricity and transport is like eating a crab with a gold-plated baby spoon, and then shrugging with feigned surprise as you stab pointlessly at the shell."

The climate "adaptation" plot

Here corporate PR emphasises that we can adapt to global warming, downplaying the need to prevent it. That rather than prevent forest fires – we can get really good at putting them out.

We do need to adapt, of course, but we also need to be wary of focusing on frames like adaptation (or efficiency) to the exclusion of others such as ending subsidies. Political will is zero-sum. When it comes to political persuasion and

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framing, you can't do both. Switzerland's 2021 referendum on whether to pass the Paris Climate Agreement underscores this point. It was rejected by 51.6% of voters. Framing matters.

Victim blaming – carbon footprint

In the early 2000s, British Petroleum rebranded itself as Beyond Petroleum based on advice from Ogilvy & Mather Advertising. But their campaign went much further than that. Ogilvy also advised BP to adopt the victim blaming frame and popularise the (then) largely unknown term of "carbon footprint."

Ogilvy's camera crews went on the streets [to film every-day people, asking them "what size is your carbon footprint?"](#) Watching their responses in 2023, now that the concept of carbon footprint is so deeply ingrained in our everyday life, is fascinating. They had no clue what a "carbon footprint" was, responding with "what?" "I haven't the foggiest," and "What is that?"

Today, most people know what "carbon footprint" means. Politicians in the pocket of big oil, as well as front groups and charities taking corporate funding, have promoted the victim blaming frame for years now. By running ad campaigns promoting recycling and low electricity consumption, promoting education in schools on how individuals can use less energy, and even promoting ineffective carbon labels, corporations have been individualising the very political problem of pollution for decades – and it's worked.

Rather than making people more likely to engage policymakers, [extensive research](#) shows that the focus on individuals makes citizens significantly less likely to support political action. One study notes that, "an effort to deploy both can backfire by reducing the likelihood that the most effective policies will be implemented." Another writes that "it's risky to take a 'both-and' approach when talking about solutions ... once personal responsibility gets into a conversation, it crowds out thinking about collective solutions."

The "it's complicated"

Chevron Oil informs us that "addressing climate-change risks in a meaningful way is a complex, long-term proposition."

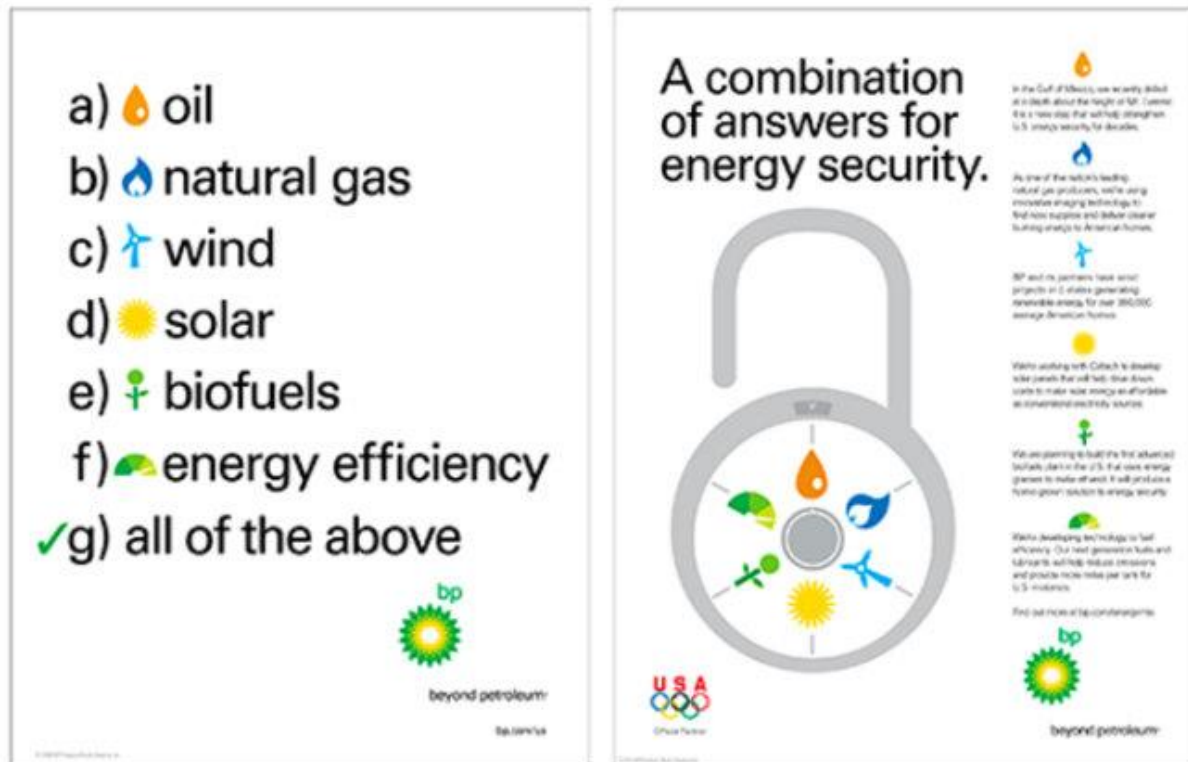
The IPA [writes](#) that "The issue of the effect of the sun on the earth's climate is highly complex and the scientific literature reviewed casts reasonable doubt on statements from the IPCC that there is an overwhelming scientific consensus that warming in recent decades is unequivocally almost entirely associated with human activities."

One recent study published in the Lancet [noted](#) that complexity is used as a "rhetorical tool – a smokescreen that justifies a lack of policy action." Corporations and their spin-masters get that. That's why they use this frame, and that's at least part of the reason why we've had 27 Climate Change Conferences (COPs) to date – each concluding with more fossil fuel subsidies than the year before.

The silver buckshot – all of the above

When Scott Morrison [referred](#) to climate change as just "one of many factors" causing bushfires, this was no off-the-cuff remark. It is the multifactorial argument, meaning we have to do everything at once.

But everything at once means that we're not focusing on what matters most. It's not only a bad strategy, it's the definition of an absence of strategy. "All of the above" was coined by Ogilvy and Mather for BP as a follow-up to their successful carbon footprint campaign, but we see other permutations such as the "[Three Es](#)", or "Multidimensional," every time a policy package includes incentives for efficient technologies, carbon capture storage, adaptation, campaigns, education, labels, and a little to no action when it comes to ending fossil fuel subsidies.



BP – all of the above strategy

By proclaiming the need to do everything, corporate PR helps governments get off the hook for doing, basically, nothing.

The dark PR playbook has made us inactive on climate as our governments subsidise the destruction of our planet. To fight back, we need to organise and demand political action – an end to subsidies and more. We first need to cut through the fog of corporate dark PR and focus on what matters. Ending subsidies, ending new coal and gas projects and lifting the price of carbon, is the simplest and most effective way to move to a world of clean energy.

Grant Ennis is a Lecturer at Monash University and the author of *Dark PR: How Corporate Disinformation Undermines Our Health and the Environment*. Grant has more than 20 years' experience in international humanitarian affairs, environmental policy, and public health. He is a distinguished alumnus of both the University of the Pacific and the Middlebury Institute of International Studies.